

Emma Goldman: An Appreciation

reprint from FE 334 Summer 1990

David Porter

2005

50 years after her death

More successfully than any other figure in US history, Emma Goldman communicated an anarchist vision to a broad audience of immigrants, native-born middle-class, and workers.

Goldman's fundamentally anarchist self-identity and vision of political change are elements neglected or misinterpreted by some of her biographers.

It was through a coherent, articulate, anarchist perspective, not socialist, liberal, or feminist frameworks, that Emma Goldman chose her particular issues of struggle.

But Goldman's anarchist commitment to non-hierarchical organization and free speech, to the need to criticize oneself as well as others, meant that any budding "Goldman cult of personality" was doomed to failure. The present-day proliferation of "Emma Goldman" collectibles, cooperatives, and bookstores, as well as the various recent biographies and anthologies of her work, would have pleased her to the extent that her anarchist principles are propounded and have become better known. Beyond that, however, she was no more prepared herself than she was to allow others to be reified or deified by movement status or popularity.

By its very nature, anarchism must continually renew and redefine itself. Throughout her life, Goldman exemplified this demand. Admirers of Emma Goldman in generations to come should remember her healthy balance of commitment without fanaticism, her denunciation of authorities while resisting efforts to install "liberationist authority" in their place. She searched endlessly for the best words to clarify individual subjugation, to suggest alternative paths to freedom and ways to strengthen one's resolve to engage in the struggle. Her ultimate goal was to help us carry out our own emancipation.

see also

Emma Goldman: A Love for Revolution

by David Porter

Fifth Estate #389, Summer, 2013

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